DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 443 123 CS 217 187

AUTHOR Taylor, Richard C.
TITLE The Personal Is Professional: What Is a Feminist Pedagogy in a Man's Composition Classroom?
PUB DATE 2000-00-00
NOTE 18p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (51st, Minneapolis, MN, April 12-15, 2000).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Classroom Techniques; *Cooperative Learning; *Feminism; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; *Program Administration; Womens Studies
IDENTIFIERS *Feminist Pedagogy; Feminist Scholarship; Learning Environments

ABSTRACT

A man professing women's studies, a male composition teacher advocating a feminist classroom, or, for that matter, a literature specialist assuming the directorship of a first-year composition program are all a "kind of cross dressing." A director of first-year composition explores the relationship among these issues in this paper. To begin with, according to the paper, to be feminist is to participate in the fight for social justice, to identify with a movement that has transformed human experience but whose work has barely begun, to reject as naive and even oppressive the persistent calls for an apolitical or ideologically neutral classroom. Noting that male participation in women's studies remains relatively rare, the paper considers some of the ways in which a man's feminist composition classroom operates, citing, for example, positive experiences with collaborative teaching and learning. The paper also muses on just what constitutes a feminist pedagogy. It concludes by discussing how a program director advocates, instructs, and directs a feminist approach for 30 teaching assistants with various points of view and personal experiences, explaining that, in addition to designing collaborative projects for undergraduates, teaching assistants in the writing program have been collaborating with each other as mentors, teachers, and researchers. The paper characterizes the composition classroom as less and less a place of solitary struggle and increasingly a polyvocal site of social action, cooperation, and community. It finds that a feminist approach affirms the importance of studying gender and identity and of studying and critiquing patriarchy as a necessary part of education. (Contains 18 notes.) (NKA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 443 123

The Personal Is Professional: What is a Feminist Pedagogy in a Man's Composition Classroom?

by Richard C. Taylor

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

CS 217 187

R. Taylor

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

The Personal Is Professional:

What is a Feminist Pedagogy in a Man's Composition Classroom?

Is it a kind of cross dressing: a man's professing women's studies, a male composition teacher's advocating a feminist classroom, or, for that matter, a literature specialist's assuming directorship of a first-year composition program? If this term is too facile, too blatant a titillation, it nonetheless suggests the sort of response evoked by these "unnatural" circumstances that somehow inherently demand explanation. It's discernible in the suspicious glances fellow parents give me in the bleachers at my son's baseball practice when I wear one of my women's studies tee-shirts; or in the interstices between polite subjects of conversation, an area my colleagues and I have tacitly agreed to avoid until some point of contention forces it to the surface. It is not entirely surprising, then, that the subject of my feminist scholarship, teaching, and viewpoints did not arise in the course of my being named a director of first-year composition: the difficulty of recruiting program coordinators being what it is, one takes what one can get, I suppose. However peculiar my circumstances, I assume they are not unique, perhaps in some respects not even uncommon, and that the relationship between personal feminist commitments, philosophy of teaching, and managing a first-year composition program needs to be further explored.

Let me first unravel my title: "The Personal is Professional," modifying the well-worn feminist credo as a reminder that so-called private experience and memory are not necessarily a separate realm from scholarly discourse, and that the exposition of self can be a valuable part of what happens in the classroom. Early and often in my schooling I

remember copying in notebooks: "do not use the first person in formal writing"—and the message was clear: worklife and homelife are separate; the academic persona serves its subject—the literature, the event, the great person--and makes itself invisible. Part of my evolving understanding of feminism was the challenge to this rigid approach to authorial voice. Now it's one of the notions I encourage my students (and myself) to get over. It's okay to write about personal experience in a professional context (let me repeat that to myself a couple of times before I proceed).

I. /or she

Next let me try to respond to the question about a man's involvement in women's studies—the question undergraduates preface with "Do you mind if I ask you something personal?" At the Southeastern Women's Studies Association Conference (I'm currently the organization's acting secretary, my eight years of participation nearly qualifying me as one of the old guard), some suspicious newcomer will eye me snatching cookies from the refreshment table and wonder what I've done to earn my snack. Come to think of it, why should I justify my professional identification at all? What quirks of fate, what intellectual predilections lead anyone to choose one area of specialization rather than another? Yet the psychological connection between personality and choice of research area is an almost irresistible puzzle, certainly part of the dynamic of the job interview process. Fortunately, it's no longer peculiar to find men writing about Zora Neale Hurston or Kate Chopin; women choosing Jack London or Stephen Crane might arouse greater curiosity. Still, a biographical reading of a scholar's research choices is probably

unavoidable, and my own choices are certainly rooted in experiences within and without the academy.

One possibility is that women's studies—or perhaps more specifically believing in and practicing a feminist pedagogy—is an expression of the impulse towards activism that has not been entirely expunged by the institutional politics of survival, where the tenure process is a lonely struggle—a self arguing with and ultimately finding an accommodation with abstractions like professional standards and refereed publication. What Wendy Hesford calls "pedagogies of witnessing" respond to our urge to break out of the isolation many of us experience as teachers and scholars and connect to the real-world injustices our students have confronted and will confront.[1] To be feminist, I believe, is to participate in the fight for social justice, to identify with a movement that has transformed human experience but whose work has barely begun, to reject as naive and even oppressive the persistent calls for an apolitical or ideologically neutral classroom. Feminism is the name I give to my own brand of liberation theology: the musical soundtrack to my teaching, the sense of danger and hope and love that helps keep it urgent.

Feminism is for the women I teach who write with confidence that whatever injustices their mothers fought, whatever violence perpetrated on the first or second "waves" is safely historical, an antiquated concern of some placard-carrying suffragettes in the impossibly distant past. It is equally for "the self-gagged white male student" as Hesford describes him.[2] Perhaps all the tidy assumptions about maleness seem alien to him. Perhaps he is searching in his writing for some other way to be male. These are my students, or the ones I would like to invite into my composition classroom. What I

learned as a student and professor of literature I believe applies fundamentally to the teaching of writing: that reading and writing are lessons in empathy--that both invite a radical reinvention of the self.

I have struggled with words like *otherness* and *difference* as part of my evolving understanding of feminism and invite my students into the struggle. In feminist events, especially academic conferences, I am sometimes the only man. I celebrate and sing "us" even though "we" is not me, a white male. "We" is joyous, united, celebratory; or it is angry or liberatory—but it is never me. At one conference, in which a member of the lesbian caucus complained about the inhibiting presence of "men," I looked around, in momentary horror, to find myself having become "men." Another of Hesford's students, an Asian American woman, asked an apparently sympathetic male student "what he had done to prove that he was not a stereotypical white male."[3] I have been asked a form of this question on numerous occasions, and I more or less deflect it: "I may, indeed, be a stereotypical white male. How credible would I be if I claim to be enlightened, if I refuse to acknowledge my own gender? I am here to learn about oppression, about patriarchy. And I am here to celebrate freedom and resistance to the weight of expectation and stereotype."'

Male participation in women's studies remains awkward and, at least judging from organizational participation, relatively rare, although far less so than in decades past. A large number of websites are devoted to men's feminist viewpoints. One with the clunky title: "Meninist: Men Supporting the Women's Movement" and with the equally silly slogan: "we are the same" is nonetheless interesting for the range of expressions its participants are contributing. There are the passionate converts like Chris

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Santucci: "I am a 24 year old male that has considered himself a feminist for the past year. . . . *The patriarchal reign of terror must come to an end* so that a new era of love and understanding can begin to flower."[4] Many of these sort of proclamations have the "more radical than thou" piety of the new convert, and I can't help wondering about Mr. Santucci's conversion event of the previous year.

There are also various protests against domestic violence (a term I use but which has always struck me as deceptively tame), negative stereotyping, the glass ceiling, threats to reproductive freedom, and so on. And there is a bit of self-pity, for which I have little sympathy: Brennan Poirier writes, "At times it can be lonely as a pro-feminist male. Most men don't understand me, and sometimes women don't either."[5] I don't believe that men can expect emotional recompense for their feminist sympathies, and it is in fact instructive to be "misunderstood." For white men especially, it is of enormous educational benefit to be judged unfairly, to face discrimination based solely on one's search for truth. An academic at Iowa State University writes, "I am the first man to become paid staff at the women's center on my campus. I face alot [*sic*] of flack from other men who don't realize the potential they are wasting in trying to be so different from women. The things I have learned in the presence of such a variety of strong women have not emasculated me, but have taught me what it means to be a man. . . . I am a heterosexual, caucasian male, but I am dissatisfied with a world where opportunity is denied anyone."[6] This last comment has the ring of lived experience—overcoming fears of female authority and defining oneself by learning about otherness. There are also comments of the "not that there's anything wrong with that" variety. A Venezuelan man expresses his hatred for chauvinism, but reassures readers, "I am a man. A normal,

straight man."[7] Not that there's anything wrong with that. In other words, if a man is gay, his feminism is understandable in the context of a shared radical gender politics that is the product of discrimination. But, Meninist members assure us, even straight guys—"real men"--can be feminist.[8]

Speaking of "straight," a couple of years ago Richard Russo's academic satire *Straight Man* provided grist for a couple of weeks of bemused joshing in my department as well, I'm sure, as in English departments around the country. I thought the book was a fairly crude rehash of what David Lodge—or certainly Bernard Malamud in *A New Life*--had done better, but one of Russo's stock figures struck fairly close to home. Russo's male feminist is a mindless ideologue and an annoying twit who "startled his colleagues by announcing at the first department gathering of the year that he had no interest in literature per se. Feminist critical theory and image-oriented culture were his particular academic interests."[9] At least cultural studies is tarred with same brush as feminist theory. "In department meetings, whenever a masculine pronoun was used, Campbell Wheemer corrected the speaker, saying, 'Or she.' His wife had grown tired of his 'affectation.' "Lately, everyone in the department had come to refer to him as Orshee."[10] "Orshee" opposes his own tenure on the grounds that rejecting him would constitute a "stand against sexism."

Am I Orshee? I'm sure I haven't corrected any of my colleagues' usage in faculty meetings. What makes this characterization painfully acute is that English professors are of course conditioned by the following interaction with the public: "Oh, you're an English professor. I better watch my grammar." In other words, I expect you will be a snippy pedant spying on my language use. So the feared, but unspoken parallel might be:

"Oh, you're a feminist. I better watch my gaze." In other words, when I'm with you I'll have to behave unnaturally to conform to your disapproval of my maleness. Or something like that. Again, no pity is warranted: feminist conviction, at the very least, means turning in your pass to the Guys Will Be Guys Club. Whatever small price there is to be paid in personal discomfort or alienation pales in comparison to the discrimination and exclusion women have faced and continue to face. If some of my colleagues think I'm Orshee, so be it.

II. a man's feminist classroom

In Robert Connors' *College English* piece "Teaching and Learning as a Man," he complains that "Feminism has begun to provide a rich discourse about women, but the place of men in this discourse has been marginal."[11] In other words, as soon as men become interested, the discipline must change to accommodate them. Women's studies presumably should become gender studies, once again obscuring the importance of studying women as a discrete subject. Connors would make men more central. He writes that he "long considered myself a strong advocate of women's issues. But I seldom felt that much of what I read was 'about' me in any personal way."[12] Now he's onto something: history had not been about women "in any personal way;" the law had not been; literature had not been; perhaps even composition, for all the arguments of its gendered disciplinarity, had not been about women "in any personal way." And if the personal is the subject—as well as the pedagogy—the discourse and questions and assumptions associated with feminism seem to me a natural fit in the writing classroom.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

If Connors and some of my male students and colleagues will forgive me, the notion that feminism is "not about" men personally seems to me a failure of the imagination.

Susan Jarratt writes that "feminism makes an intervention: into a consumately rhetorical situation it brings an enunciative relationship--'I' speaking to 'you.'"[13] And of course men have been the subject of that discourse: perhaps not male empowerment or male identity, but rather male appropriation, the tentacles of male agency that have obscured women's identity, suppressed women's accomplishment, linguistically erased female humanity. Into that rhetorical situation writers insert themselves: not to be blessed or forgiven but to be sensitized to the situation itself. In the writerly situation there are male and female readers and female and male authorial selves and there is gender as a subject mediating our understanding of language and the possibility of communication. Feminism, it seems to me, is centrally about "us" as writers at the millennial turn: conflicted, recoiling from our past, reinventing ourselves while still untangling our identities from the old assumptions that had bound us.

To return to my title: is mine a man's composition classroom? First, and obviously, it is the university's classroom and the department's classroom and twenty-five students' classroom, and my presence shouldn't and doesn't make it mine. A different question, though, is whether my being male changes the nature of the classes I teach. Or, rather, is my maleness a more fundamental signifier in the classroom than my embrace of the principles that have come to be associated with feminism? Eileen Schell suggests that men have a freedom women instructors lack: the choice to adopt a nurturing pedagogy or one that favors critical challenge and intellectual rigor." She argues that for women, caring is a "socially mandated behavior."[14] First, I wonder if Schell isn't setting

up a false dichotomy: two pedagogical approaches, both equally appropriate, and one denied women by virtue of social expectation. Whether male instructors have a free choice in this matter or are constrained is left unsaid. I would argue that "critical challenge" without nurturance is poor pedagogy, and similarly nurturance without intellectual demand is similarly poor. Learning demands both; the teaching situation demands both from whoever would lead it.

Perhaps a series of positive experiences with collaborative teaching and my experiments with various forms of collaborative learning in the classroom have led me to become dogmatic on this issue, but I feel that the solitary authority model, the old authoritarian classroom, cannot be as effective a learning environment as the more egalitarian and, yes, nurturing pedagogies that have developed as alternatives. I share with Amy Goodburn and Carrie Leverenz a commitment to what they call feminist principles of management, whether as an instructor or in my capacity as a director of first-year composition: "nonhierarchical collaboration, shared leadership, and the recognition of multiples sources of authority."[15]

Feminist theory has at least inspired pedagogies that emphasize group learning, collaborative teaching, and cooperation as opposed to models that emphasized competition, solitary study, and univocal authority.

Some are rejecting this binary opposition as unfair and are challenging the nexus between feminism and collaborative management. The idea of consensus, which has been characteristic of feminist organization, has also been critiqued as a disguised form of oppression. Even if it is possible to oppose patriarchy, to practice shared leadership and collaborative decision-making without identifying those practices as feminist, I believe

that group learning, the decentered and nonauthoritarian classroom, the validation of personal experience in the composition classroom—all share at least the spirit and modus operandi of women's studies and the feminisms I have studied.

One of the hazards of a teacher's self-identification as feminist is that students have comparatively little experience in contextualizing that term, so the word is ambiguous, or it is a simple ideological label. I once had a teacher who identified herself as a Republican, at which moment, for me, she lost all intellectual authority. Perhaps the same thing happens when students determine or I mention my being feminist. I can be feminist as long as no one notices? How do students interpret the term in the absence of careful explanation (which I think is the preferable alternative)? "He's a 60s lefty. He's trying to appeal to the women in the class. He's gay. He's a gender traitor." Perhaps they are much more sophisticated than that or perhaps again it is less of an issue for them than I might imagine. Perhaps their response is more pragmatic: "Will your being feminist affect my grade in the course? Do you favor women students?"
For me, concealing this feature of myself isn't a real option anyway—not if I'm to have any credibility or any sort of open communication with students.

What I have concealed up to now is the most unpleasant part of my identification with feminism: my having grown up witnessing spousal abuse—the dramatic and cruel expression of patriarchal authority, relentless and informing. This was a dominant feature of my childhood, and so has made itself manifest in my professional identity. The features of male power, of male oppressiveness, of sexism, are to me vivid and concrete. Feminism is about me personally, and I believe it is about those who have either personally experienced or allowed themselves to imagine the stark terror of domestic

violence. My evolving sense of feminist teaching urges me now towards confession and towards allowing the composition classroom to embrace that sort of confession—the secrets our students write in their journals--although I still shy from the revelations, from the danger of their exposing old wounds.

What exactly is a feminist pedagogy? When I first taught Women's Studies, I team-taught with a department chair who ran an authoritarian classroom—who quizzed students on their preparedness and called on those who looked puzzled. My role was a secondary one: an assistant and substitute. It was not until I was invited to teach collaboratively in a graduate seminar on composition pedagogy that I began to see collaborative teaching, like collaborative learning, as a feminist activity. The various experiments with collaborative teaching I am currently engaged in strike me as at least consistent with the feminism I believe in: anti-hierarchical in leaning, cooperative rather than competitive, communal rather than authoritarian.

A feminist pedagogy allows the self to be the subject. It would explore the relationship between language and our assumptions about gender and identity, and it would bring all stereotypes into question. Connors rightly objects to male students being "stereotyped as insensitive, or passive, or defensive?" The authority that I bring to the classroom I hope I use to help establish an atmosphere in which all such assumptions are brought into question, and to preserve my own uncertainty. The feminist classroom, it seems to me, is self-reflective, skeptical, reinventing itself. It rejects all manner of romantic mythology—even my own. And I believe a feminist pedagogy is at best spontaneous, rather than tightly controlled and scripted. Spontaneity invites genuinely democratic participation, even at the terrible cost of throwing out the syllabus.

III. oh no, the feminists are taking over the comp program

The problem I am currently coming to grips with is one undertaken by Amy Goodburn and Carrie Shively Leverenz in their piece "Feminist Writing Program Administration: Resisting the Bureaucrat Within." An accidental tourist both to composition and to program administration, I've spent the last two years, to my horror, discovering my inner bureaucrat. As Goodburn and Leverenz note, "compositionists who also identify themselves as feminists have begun to consider how a commitment to feminism does and should inform research and teaching about writing."[17] Those of us with feminist commitments and responsibility for directing first-year composition might wonder how the business of franchising first-year composition courses can be made compatible with the feminist orientation that has been a part of our own pedagogy. In other words, it's one thing to implement a feminist pedagogy in my own classroom; still another to advocate, instruct, and direct a feminist approach for thirty teaching assistants with various points of view and personal experiences.

The institution where I teach endorses cultural diversity as a part of its mission. Multiculturalism is officially approved. Feminism is not; several years ago a search committee hiring a new women's studies director learned that it could not make "feminist credentials" a job requirement. So can I insist on feminist practice or feminist belief in directing the teaching assistants? Do I do it surreptitiously or subtly—"you're using a feminist approach without even knowing it"? Do I offer a special feminist pedagogical package as an option? Or should I set aside my own belief entirely in constructing an

effective "franchisable" program for first-year composition, a program that serves the university and the public in an unobjectionably safe and apparently ideologically neutral manner? Which form of dishonesty do I embrace? Ah, bureacracy.

Having set myself up for bureaucratic compromise, I begin by defining feminism broadly enough to include fairly widely held, comparatively uncontroversial positions. Group work, the sort of fluid interaction many feminist compositionists have advocated, the de-authorizing of the patriarchal teaching presence—these are all fairly safe positions to maintain, and have been part of the T.A. instruction curriculum for many years. In addition to designing collaborative projects for undergraduates, our teaching assistants have been collaborating with each other as mentors, teachers, researchers—as part of teaching circles and even as teaching partners with senior faculty members. Metaphors of connectedness, which have been influential in curriculum redesign, owe their origins, at least in part, to feminist theory, and the results include the service learning movement, which is helping to bridge the gap between the classroom and the community. The composition classroom is less and less a place of solitary struggle and increasingly a polyvocal site of social action, cooperation, and community.

Louise Wetherbee Phelps describes the awkwardness some feminist compositionists experience in assuming institutional power. She calls it "an experience that pressures feminists to develop new understandings of power and virtue in the workplaces that do not depend on purity or unalloyed innocence and are not predicated only on insights derived from the feminist standpoint." She then caricatures feminists in composition imagining "a safe, utopian social space (a classroom or a program) informed by culturally 'feminine' principles like cooperation, dialogue, nonhierarchical structures,

and `caring.'"[18] Presumably, the feminist comp administrator attempts with great difficulty to apply these values to directing a program. But it seems to me that the idea of the classroom as contact zone is also deservedly called feminist: a critique of power relations and gender assumptions that needs to be an ongoing feature of classroom pedagogy as well as of program management. Effective leadership in either context can never be entirely cooperative, nor can it or should it be entirely safe.

For better or worse, I find myself growing increasingly comfortable using the first person in my scholarship, and using my professional writing as a space in which to explore what I had once deemed private experience. Perhaps the term *feminist* has been beaten to airy thinness from all the purposes it has served, and there is some danger that the term means so much that it means almost nothing. On the other hand, proof of its significance lies in its continuing power to strike chords deep within people: those for whom it represents a threat, as well as for those for whom it represents liberation. A feminist pedagogy affirms a broad-ranging intellectual tradition, centuries old—I'm not one of those who believes that any application of the term before the later twentieth century is anachronistic. As an approach, it is disciplinary—in its interconnectedness with women's studies—and interdisciplinary. It affirms the importance of studying gender and identity, of studying and critiquing patriarchy as a necessary part of education, of social justice as an integral part of the curriculum, of studying women as a discrete subject.

I have taught women's literature and women's studies long enough that I no longer anticipate with anxious excitement the puzzlement students might feel about a man's being professedly feminist or teaching a subject most frequently taught by women. I bring up the issue now when students explicitly ask me about it. But I am a relative newcomer to composition and especially to program leadership. But in both instances, I'm sure that I have used the first person: that is, who I am is part of my pedagogy; I've been less fastidious about protecting my personal commitments, and I hope that my own beliefs will encourage the teaching assistants I lead to adopt many of the same practices and commitments. But I also try not to force my own brand of feminism on students—or any other sort of belief or approach. Rather, I hope that they will find it appealing and effective and choose to embrace and adapt this elusive and perhaps still-dangerous approach for themselves.

Notes

[1] Wendy S. Hesford, "'Ye Are Witnesses': Pedagogy and the Politics of Identity" in *Feminism and Composition Studies*, ed. Susan C. Jarratt & Lynn Worsham (New York: MLA, 1998): 132-152.

[2] Hesford, p. 146.

[3] Hesford, p. 150.

[4] "Meninist," [http://feminist.com/men.htm], 2 February 2000, p. 5.

[5] "Meninist," p. 2.

[6] "Meninist," p. 4.

[7] "Meninist, " p. 7.

[8] Other relevant sites include MensNet [http://infoweb.magi.com/~mensnet/], which advertises itself as "a network for pro-feminist, gay affirmative, anti-racist, male positive men"; REALMEN [wysiwyg://107/http://www3.50megs.com/jmansfield/feminism/realmen.html], an "anti-sexist men's organization" focusing on macho stereotypes and male violence; and Men Supporting Feminism [http://grove.ufl.edu/~law000/Mens_Involvement.html], which also campaigns against male violence and sexism.

[9] Richard Russo, *Straight Man* (New York: Random House, 1997): p. 15.

[10] Russo, p. 19.

[11] Robert Connors, "Teaching and Learning as a Man," *College English* 58 (1996): p. 139.

[12] Connors, p. 143.

[13] Susan C. Jarratt, "Introduction: As We Were Saying . . ." *Feminism and Composition Studies*, p. 12.

[14] Eileen E. Schell, "The Costs of Caring: 'Feminism' and Contingent Women Workers in Composition Studies" in *Feminism and Composition Studies*, p. 78.

[15] Amy Goodburn and Carrie Leverenz, "Feminist Writing Program Administration: Resisting the Bureaucrat Within" in *Feminism and Composition Studies*, p. 277.

[16] Connors, p. 149.

[17] Goodburn and Leverenz, p. 276.

[18] Louise Wetherbee Phelps, "Lessons of the Feminist Workplace" in *Feminine Principles and Women's Experience in American Composition and Rhetoric* (Pittsburgh: U of Pittsburgh P, 1995): p. 293